

VOICES FROM THE FRONTLINE

Food parcels and the benefits system



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Citizens Advice Scotland (CAS), our 61 member bureaux and the Citizen Advice Consumer Service helpline form Scotland's largest independent advice network. Advice provided by the Scottish CAB Service is free, independent, confidential, impartial and available to everyone. Our website, Adviceguide, also provides the public with up-to-date information on a range of topics. We are champions for both citizens and consumers and in 2012/13 we helped over 314,000 people deal with over a million issues.

Our series of briefings '**Voices from the Frontline**' show the reality of the impact of current welfare changes on the people of Scotland. We highlight the experiences of the thousands of clients advised by CAB in Scotland and make recommendations for change.

Summary

Between January and March 2014, citizens advice bureaux in Scotland recorded 1,311 new food parcel issues – this equates to **one food parcel issue for every 50 clients who received advice**. Extrapolating this figure to the number of clients that seek advice at bureaux suggests that bureaux advise on over 5,500 food parcel issues in a year. Our experience is that people from all walks of life can experience a crisis that necessitates a food parcel referral. However, bureau evidence shows that there are certain client groups that are more likely to need a food parcel, including men, the unemployed, those unable to work due to a disability, and those living in local authority housing.

The immediacy and severity of the situation facing many clients who seek advice is putting significant pressure on bureaux and their volunteers. Bureaux across the country have had to urgently amend their advice provision and make vital links with local sources of free food in order to meet the immediate needs of clients who cannot afford to eat.

Case evidence from bureaux indicates that benefit delays and welfare reform are a factor in driving increased need for food parcels. Whether it is delays in payments, Jobseeker sanctions, sickness benefit reassessments, or the Bedroom Tax, welfare changes are placing a significant burden on many low income families and making it difficult for them to put food on the table.

Who needs food parcels?

Bureau evidence shows that there are certain client groups that are more likely to need a food parcel, including men, the unemployed, those unable to work due to a disability, and those living in local authority housing. The majority of clients are single without caring responsibilities, although a minority have dependent children.

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Based on 760 clients with a food parcel issue who had their client profile recorded at bureaux in this period:

- Men are more likely to be given this type of support (1 food parcel issue per 35 male clients that seek advice – compared to 1 in 79 for female clients).
- Clients in this position were more likely to be unemployed (1 food parcel per 12 unemployed clients), unable to work due to a disability (1 in 26), and to live in council rented accommodation (1 in 18).

Food parcels and benefits - evidence from bureaux

The provision of food parcel and food aid has grown significantly in Scotland in the last three years. The Trussell Trust, which currently operates 26 foodbanks in Scotland, provided food to over 70,000 people in 2013/14 – five times the number compared to the previous year. A range of other organisations, such as Fareshare and the Salvation Army, also provide food to those in need. Citizens advice bureaux work with local providers of food to ensure that clients in need are signposted to local sources of support.

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Evidence from citizens advice bureaux, and from a range of other organisations, strongly suggests that a major factor in creating the demand for food parcels has been **benefit reform and poor administration**.

Sanctions

In particular, the sanctions regime for JSA and ESA claimants has been a factor in the rise in food bank use. Jobseekers Allowance (JSA) claimants are required to meet a number of conditions in order to show that they are actively seeking employment. A failure to meet these conditions may result in the claimant's JSA payments being sanctioned (i.e. stopped) for a fixed period of up to three years. Claimants can receive sanctions for a number of reasons, including failure to apply for or accept a job, failure to attend a mandatory Jobcentre meeting, or failure to participate in the Work Programme.

Increasingly bureaux see clients who have lost weeks of income for relatively minor reasons, such as being five minutes late, not logging onto IT properly or doing one too few jobsearches in a week.

Recent statistics from the DWP showed that 75,329 JSA sanctions were applied to jobseekers in Scotland in the year up to September 2013 – over 200 per day. Over 2,224 sanctions were 'high level' sanctions meaning a sanction of at least 13 weeks.

In the first nine months of 2013/14, clients sought advice on 2,260 new sanctions issues at a Scottish citizens advice bureau, with many clients reporting that the sanction had placed them in an often desperate situation.



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- A West of Scotland CAB reports of a 20 year old client who sought advice after her JSA claim was sanctioned. The sanction was imposed without any notice on her usual payment date, meaning that she had no opportunity to put aside any money to last her the two weeks before she could get a hardship payment. The client received a sanction because she hadn't filled in her online job search properly as she was unable to log on due to a problem with the system. The client had written down her job searches, but this wasn't deemed to be enough. The client had already been given a food parcel and wanted to appeal the sanction decision.
- An East of Scotland CAB reports of a client who was sanctioned for four weeks after he was 20 minutes late for an appointment. The client is currently caring for his 15 year old sister after their mother started a custodial sentence. The client currently has no money and doesn't know how he will provide for his sister. The client was late for his appointment on the same day that his sister started to live with him. The client arranged for a food parcel to be picked up by the client, asked for a mandatory reconsideration of the sanction, and helped the client to apply for a Crisis Grant.
- A West of Scotland CAB reports of a client who is type 1 diabetic and has been sanctioned for four weeks. The client is also the mother of a six year old child. The client's own mother has been providing food for them until now, but cannot afford to continue as her only income is from benefits. The client had completed a Hardship Form, but the Jobcentre would not give her any help as to where to send it or hand it in. The bureau was able to source some food for the client from a local community centre.

Benefit administration

The Trussell Trust estimates that around 30% of people accessing their services do so because of 'benefit delay'. This type of issue makes up a significant proportion of benefit issues that bureaux advise on with clients seeking advice on over 13,000 benefit payment issues in 2012/13. Even where the target time for processing a claim is met, the gap between need and payment can be a long time to cope without income. In other cases, claimants can be left without payments for long periods with little indication of when they can expect payment.

- A South of Scotland CAB reports of a client who has been waiting a month for Jobseekers Allowance (JSA) payments after making a claim. The client is living off Child Benefit, using it to pay for food, heating, and gas for her partner and two children. As her JSA claim has not been processed yet, her Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit claims are unable to be processed. The client has an appointment at the Jobcentre and has been told that if she doesn't attend she will not receive JSA. However, the client has no money to get to the Jobcentre.
- A North of Scotland CAB reports of a client who has been suffering hardship due to poor Jobcentre Plus administration. The 55 year old client, who has had cancer and a stroke, has had two ESA applications lost by JCP in the last two months. As a result, the client has not had any income for seven weeks and has needed two Crisis Grants and a referral to a food bank.

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Disability/sickness benefit reassessments

The ongoing reassessments of disability and sickness benefit claimants is having a significant impact on the income and health of tens of thousands of people across the country. This includes 170,000 sickness benefit claimants being reassessed for ESA, with estimates indicating that 115,000 will lose entitlement as a result. ESA is by far the most common issue that clients seek advice on at bureaux, and there is evidence that the reassessment is putting vulnerable claimants in food poverty. The reassessment of current DLA claimants for Personal Independence Payment (PIP) is beginning and we are already seeing claimants put into hardship as a result of severe delays in the process.

- An East of Scotland CAB reports of a client who was assessed as fit for work in an ESA assessment after claiming Incapacity Benefit for a number of years. The client suffers from insulin-dependent diabetes, has peripheral neuropathy, and has had two heart attacks. The client says that she is not eating properly as she cannot afford to after the drop in her income. The client is having frequent blackouts due to her poor diet and diabetes.
- Citizens Advice Direct reports of a 17 year old and his family who have been severely affected by delays in his reassessment for Personal Independence Payment (PIP). The client's son has just turned 17 which meant that his DLA claim has ended and he needed to re-apply for PIP. As a result, all of the benefits they were able to claim to look after their son have now been stopped pending the PIP assessment. They have been told that it might take up to 16 weeks for a decision to be made. The family are now reliant on charitable donations from their local church, who are helping them with food, fuel and rent. However, this is not enough to cover basic family needs and they are falling into greater debt.

Conclusion

While there are underlying issues behind many of these cases – such as unemployment and ill health – it is clear that aspects of the benefits system are causing bureau clients to need a food parcel. This can be caused by issues in the administration of benefits, in which lost applications and poor administration can leave entitled claimants without funds for weeks. However, what is more concerning is that benefit policy, particularly in the case of sanctions, can leave vulnerable clients with severely reduced income.

There are many organisations across Scotland that provide vital support to those experiencing food poverty, whether it is through advice, income maximisation, charity support, or access to food. Without support from these organisations, the consequences for thousands of people in food poverty would be far worse. However, we believe that the most effective action on this issue must focus on addressing the *causes* of food poverty. In this respect, change must focus on ensuring that claimants do not fall through the benefits safety net.

Keith Dryburgh, Policy Manager, Citizens Advice Scotland
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